

Satan Sanderson

By **HALLIE ERMINIE RIVES,**
Author of
"Hearts Courageous," Etc.
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Chapter 17

THE little town had been unconsciously grateful for its new sensation. The return of Hugh Stires and his apparent curious transformation was the prime subject of conversation. For a half year the place had known but one other event as startling. That was the finding some months before of a dead body—that of a comparative stranger in the place—thrust beneath a thicket on Smoky mountain, on the very claim which now held Prendergast and his partner.

The "amen corner" of the Mountain Valley House had discussed the pros and cons exhaustively. There were many who sneered at the loss of memory and took their cue from Devlin, who, smarting from his humiliation and nursing venom, revamped suspicions wherever he showed his battered face. In his opinion Hugh Stires was "playing a slick game."

"Your view is colored by your prejudices, Devlin," said Felder. "He's been a blackleg in the past—granted. But give the devil his due. As for the other ugly tale, there's no more evidence against him than there is against you or me!"

"They didn't find the body on my ground," had been the other's surly retort, "and I didn't clear out the day before either."

The phenomenon, however, whether credited or poohpoohed, was a drawing card. More than a few found occasion to climb the mountain by the hillside trail that skirted the lonely cabin. These as likely as not saw Prendergast lounging in the doorway smoking, while the younger man worked, leading a trench along the brow of the hill to bring the water from its intake, which Harry's quick eye had seen was practicable.

The spectacle of Hugh Stires, who had been used to pass his days in the saloons and his nights in even less becoming resorts, turned practical miner added a touch of opera bouffe to the situation that to a degree modulated the rigor of dispraise. It was the consensus of opinion that the new Hugh Stires seemed vastly different from the old; that if he were "playing a game" it was a curious one.

On the one side was a black record, exemplified in Prendergast—clouded infamy, a shuddering abhorrence of his past self as he saw it through the pitiless lens of public opinion; on the other was a grim constancy of purpose, a passionate wish to reconstruct the warped structure of life of which he found himself the tenant, days of healthful peace inspiring toil, a woman's face that threaded his every thought. As he wielded his pick in the trench or laboriously washed out the few glistening grains that now were to mean his daily sustenance he turned often to gaze up the slope where, set in its foliage, the glass roof of the sanitarium sparkled softly through the Indian haze. Strange that the sight should mysteriously suggest the face that haunted him!

Prendergast saw the abstracted regard as he came up the trail from the town. He was in an ugly humor. The bag of gold dust which he had shown to Harry he had not returned to the hiding place in the wall, and with this in his pocket the faro table had that day tempted him. The pouch was empty now.

Harry's back was toward him, and the gold pan in which he had been washing the gravel lay at his feet. With a noiseless, mirthless laugh Prendergast stole into the cabin and reached down from the shelf the bottle into which each day Harry had poured his scanty findings. He weighed it in his hand—almost two ounces, a little less than \$20. He hastily took the empty bag from his pocket.

But just then a shadow darkened the doorway, and Harry entered. He saw the action and, striding forward, took the bottle from the other's hand.

Prendergast turned on him, a sinister snarl under his affectation of surprise. "Can't you attend to your own rat killing?" he growled. "I guess I've got a right to what I need."

"Not to that," said Harry quietly. "We shall touch the bottom of the flour sack tomorrow. You expect to get your meals here, I presume."

"I still look forward to that pleasure," answered Prendergast, with an evil sneer. "Three meals a day and a rotten roof over my head. When I think of the little I have done to deserve it, the hospitality overcomes me."

All I have done is to keep you from starving to death and out of quod at the same time. I only taught you a safe way to beat the game, an easier one than you seem to know, and to live on Easy street."

"I am looking for no easy way," responded Harry, "whatever you mean by that. I expect to earn my living as I'm earning it now. It's an honest method, at all events."

"You've grown all fired particular since you lost your memory," retorted Prendergast, his eyes narrowing. "You'll be turning dominie one of these days. Perhaps you expect to get the town to take up with you and to make love to the beauty in the green riding habit that brought you here on her horse the night you were out of your head."

Harry started. "What do you mean?" he asked thickly.

Prendergast's oily manner was gone now. His savage temper came uppermost.

"I forgot you didn't know about that," he scoffed. "I made a neat story of it in the town. They've been gabbling about it ever since."

Harry caught his breath. As through a mist he saw again that green habit on the hotel balcony—that face that had haunted his waking consciousness. It had not been Prendergast alone, then, who had brought him here. And her act of charity had been made, no doubt, a thing for the titling of the town, cheapened by chatter, coarsened by joke!

"I wonder if she'd done it if she'd known all I know," continued the other malevolently. "You'd better go up to the sanitarium, Hugh, and give her a nice sweet kiss for it!"

A lust of rage rose in Harry's throat, but he choked it down. His hand fell like iron on Prendergast's shoulder and turned him forcibly toward the open door. His other hand pointed, and his suppressed voice said: "This cabin has grown too small for us both. The town will suit you better."

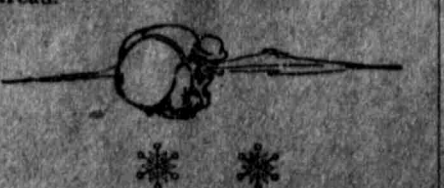
Prendergast shrank before the wrath whitened face, the dangerous sparkle in the eyes. "You've got through with me," he glowered, "and you think you can go it alone." The old suspicion leaped in the malicious countenance. "Well, it won't pay you to try it yet. I know too much! Do you understand? I know too much!"

Harry went out of the cabin. At the door he turned. "If there is anything you own here," he said, "take it with you. You needn't be here when I come back."

His fingers shaking with the black rage in his heart, Prendergast gathered his few belongings, rolled them in the white horse skin which he drew from beneath his bunk and wrapped the whole in a blanket. He fastened the bundle in a pack strap, slung it over his shoulder and left the cabin. He settled his burden and went rapidly down the trail, turning over in his mind his future schemes.

As it chanced, there was one who saw his vindictive face. Jessica, crouched on the Knob, had seen him come and now depart, pack on back, and guessed that the pair had parted company. Her whole being flamed with sympathy. She could see his malignant scowl plainly from where she leaned, screened by the bushes. It terrified her. What had passed between them in the cabin? She left the Knob wondering.

All that evening she was ill at ease. At midnight, sleepless, she was looking out from her bedroom window across the phantom peopled shadows, where on the face of the pale sky the stars trembled like slow tears. Anxiety and dread were in her heart; a pale phantom of fear seemed lurking in the shadows; the night was full of dread.



A fresh shipment of National Biscuit Co.'s, crackers, at The Bridge Store

Chapter 18

ON the day following the explosion of Prendergast, Harry woke restless and unrefreshed. Fleeting sensations

mocked him—a disturbing conviction that the struggling memory in some measure had succeeded in reasserting itself in the shadowy kingdom of sleep. Waking, the apparitions were fled again into their obscurity, leaving only the wraiths of recollection to startle and disquiet. A girl's face hovered always before him—ruling his consciousness as it had ruled his sleeping thought.

He took down from its shelf the bottle he had rescued from Prendergast's intention and emptied it of its glistening grains—enough to replenish his depleted stock of provisions. He paused a moment as he put on his hat, smiling whimsically, a little sadly. He dreaded entering the town. But there could be no remedy in concealment. If he was to live and work there, appear he must on the streets sooner or later. Smoky Mountain must continue to think of him as it might. What he was from that time on was all that could count to him.

If he had but known it there was good reason for hesitation today. Early that morning, an angry rumor had disturbed the town. The sluice of the



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hydraulic company had been robbed again. Some two months previously there had occurred a series of depredations by which the company had suffered. The boxes were not swept of their golden harvest each day, and in spite of all precautions coarse gold had disappeared mysteriously from the rifles, this, although armed men had watched all night. There had been much guess work. The cabin on the hillside was the nearest habitation—the company's fume disgorged its flood in the gulch beneath it—and suspicion had eventually pointed its way. The sudden ceasing of the robberies with the disappearance of Hugh Stires had given focus to this suspicion. Now, almost coincident with his return, the thievery had recommenced. It had been a red letter day for Devlin and his ilk, who caviled at the more charitable. Of all this, however, the object of their "I told you so" was serenely ignorant.

Entering the town, there were few stirring on the sunny streets, but he could not but be aware that those he met stopped to gaze after him. Some indeed followed. His first objective point was a jeweler's, where he could turn his gold dust into readier coin for needful purchases. He saw a sign next the Mountain Valley House and entered.

The jeweler weighed the dust, with a distrustful frown, but Harry's head was turned away. He was reading a freshly printed placard tacked on the wall, an offer of reward for the detection of the sluice thief. He read it through mechanically, for as he read there came from the street outside a sound that touched a muffled chord in his brain. It was the exhaust of a motor car.

He thrust the money the goldsmith grudgingly handed him into his pocket and turned to the door. A long red automobile had stopped at the curb. Two men whom he carried were just entering the hotel. Something in the sight of the long, low "racer" reminded Harry of what? His eye traced its polished lines, noting its cunning mechanism, its build for silent speed, with the eager lighting of a connoisseur. He took a step toward it, oblivious to all about him.

He did not note that men were gathering, that the nearest saloon was emptying of its occupants. Nor did he see a girl on horseback, with a tiny child before her on the saddle, who reined up sharply opposite.

The rider was Jessica, the child an ecstatic five-year-old she had picked up on the fringe of the town to cauterize with her hands gripping the pommel of the saddle. She saw Harry's position instantly and guessed it perilous. What did the men mean to do? She leaned forward, a swift apprehension in her face.

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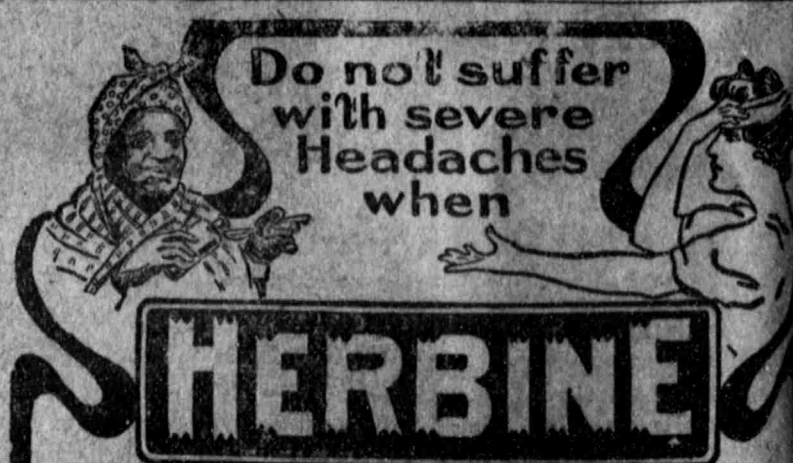
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